

MEET THE MEMBERS



A LIFE IN ENGINEERING

Neil Wilson talk to Peter Watts – Sirocco-builder, former Formula 3 driver, and an acclaimed restorer of classic and vintage racing cars and aircraft

You may recall the *Flight Test of the Jurca Sirocco* owned by Peter Watts in the January issue of *LA*. After Clive Davidson had finished his test and I'd taken the pictures, we got chatting to Peter about how he'd got into aviation and engineering.

As the conversation evolved, it became clear that Peter has been a PFA/LAA member for almost fifty years, and had a lifelong passion for aviation, engineering and motor racing.

With a little persuasion, Peter agreed that we could go back and visit him at the premises of his company, in Dursley, Gloucestershire – for a chat focused on the man himself and Retro Track and Air Ltd (www.retrotrackandair.com).

How did your passion for engineering begin?

I was born in Birmingham during WWII, and spent quite some time – at weekends and during school holidays – with my grandparents, who owned a bicycle repair business. I used to

(Above) Peter in the Retro Track and Air Ltd workshop, with the Gloster Gladiator Mk 2 that he's currently rebuilding.

help out, which I suppose sowed the seed to my interest in all things mechanical.

I later did an apprenticeship in Birmingham, which was then the heartland of a thriving British engineering industry, and learned so many more things that have stood me in good stead ever since.

I actually started motor racing before aviation came along. I took part in many races, driving a Lotus Seven, and built my own car, the 'Gloster Gambit', with my close friend Hamish Munroe, who was initially my partner in the Sirocco.

That was the era when we had the 1,000cc Formula 3, and cars were being built by the likes of Brabham, Lotus and Cooper. I managed to get a work's drive with the

Alexis Team and it was very exciting to be so involved in the sport but I retired in 1967, when I got married.

What happened after you stopped racing?

Over the years that followed, our family came along – we have four sons and a daughter, all of whom now work here in the family business. From the seventies to the mid-eighties, I worked for Lister Petter, who made diesel engines.

I started as a maintenance electrician and gained a great deal of experience as I moved from one department to another. In the mid-eighties, the company was cutting back and, after a few rounds of being asked about voluntary redundancy, I finally took it and used the money to set up my own company, Retro Track and Air, in 1987.

As I mentioned, all my offspring now work with me, so it's very much a family business. For instance, my second son, Matthew, who

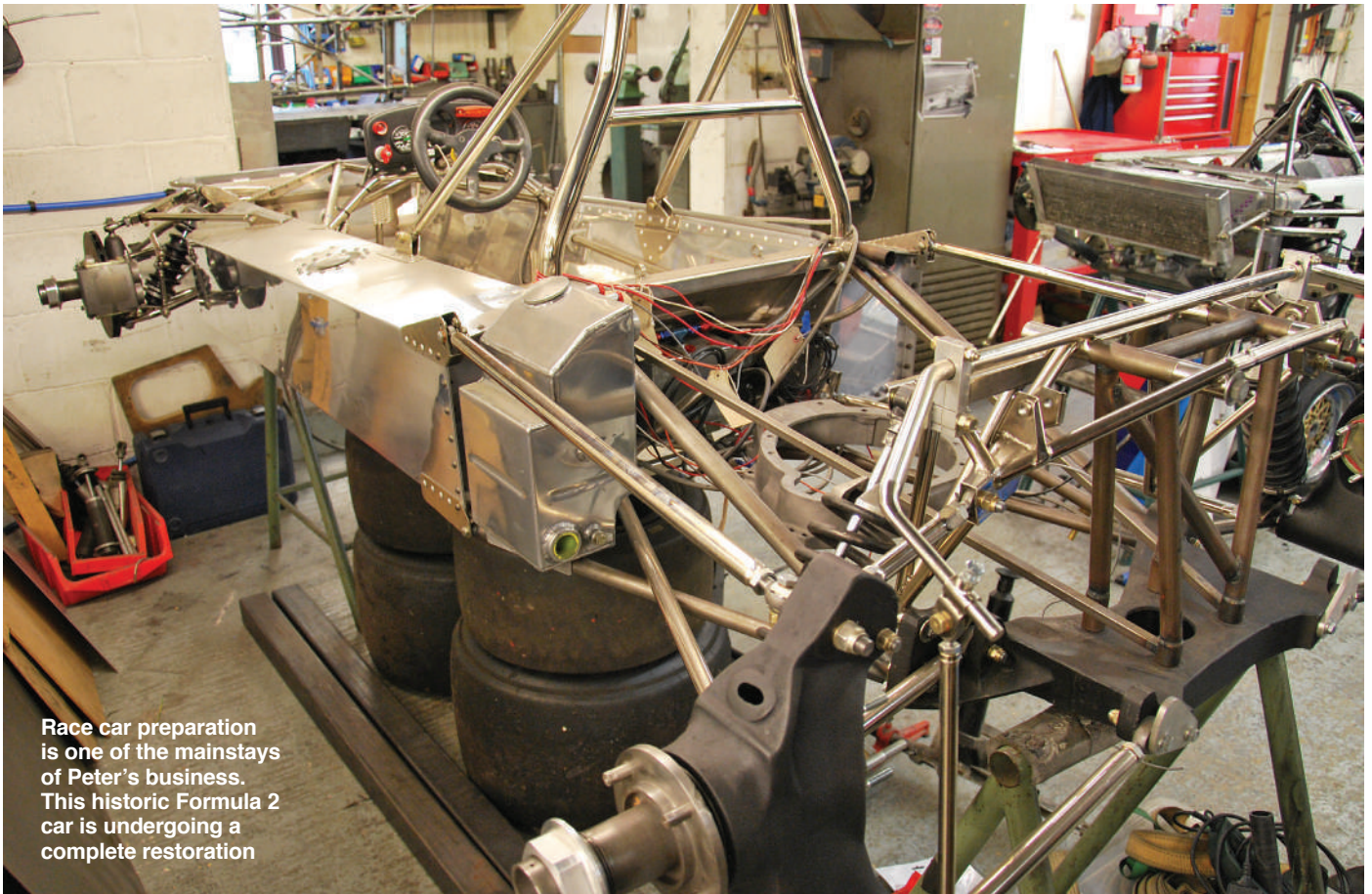
MEET THE MEMBERS



(Above) Peter, on the far right, driving an Alexis Mk 6 Formula 3 car, designed by Bill Harris in 1964. Alexis was founded by Alex Francis and Harris in 1959, and by the time this shot was taken, Team Alexis was being run by Lotus 7 racer Allan Taylor.



The CASA-built Bücker Bü 131 Jungmann that Peter helped to restore with the Cotswold Flying Group.



Race car preparation is one of the mainstays of Peter's business. This historic Formula 2 car is undergoing a complete restoration

racers historic Formula 2 cars, is now the MD of the company. You'll find him re-building racing cars for the many customers whose vehicles we look after during and between seasons.

Matthew currently runs in the European F2 Championship, so the family tradition is still racing along!

My youngest, Rachel, who's learnt to fly, does our administration and makes sure that 'Dad gets to the right places at the right time and does what he's meant to be doing'!

How did you start in aviation?

After I retired from racing, flying looked like a fun thing to do so I learned at Staverton with the Gloucester Aero Club. I was taught by John Cole on a Piel CP-30 Emeraude and a Fournier RF-4.

Getting my own aircraft was next on the agenda, so I joined the LAA – then the PFA, which is what I still call it – in about 1969. I

had it in mind to build something a bit different, so I contacted Marcel Jurca and bought a set of plans to start a Jurca Sirocco. I started building it in 1970, along with my friend Hamish. In those days, if you were a builder then your PFA membership number had a 'B' on the end of it!

I could soon see that the project was going to take some time, so along with a few pals we bought a Jodel D117 which was being sold because of glue failure. That was an ideal restoration project, as it helped us to learn about aeroplanes as well as make good contacts within the business who could help us with advice, et cetera.

The aeroplane, G-BCLU, won The Wilkinson Sword Trophy for the Best Jodel at the PFA Rally. It's still flying and, I hope, still giving the current owners lots of good 'air time'. I then heard that the Spanish Air Force were selling off some CASA Jungmanns so the Cotswold

Flying Group bought one in bits and I helped rebuild it. Again, that was a very enjoyable project, and when it was complete we took it to the PFA Rally, but were beaten into second place in the Concours by the Arrow Active!

We finally finished the Sirocco in 2006. It was what I would call 'an extended, enjoyable experience', as to build it was a real labour of love and a challenge. It wasn't the most straightforward of builds, but it was a good one, none-the-less.

Local ex-military and professional pilot, Steve Noujaim did the test flying for me and, so far, it has about 120 hours on it. Rachel is now flying a Chipmunk and I look forward to the day when she converts onto the Sirocco.

It seems that your hobby turned into a business...

Yes, as many things do – it just turned out that way, really. I saw an opportunity to get involved and offer high-quality engineering



Clive Davidson conducting the LA Flight Test in the Jura Sirocco.



(Left) Following the closure of Leonard Reece Precision Camshafts in 2003, Peter acquired the tooling and patterns to manufacture and recondition camshafts for a wide range of aircraft and historic racing and classic/vintage cars.

(Right) Peter is rightfully proud of Retro Track and Air's contribution to keep historic aircraft flying, by manufacturing such parts as cylinder heads for the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine.

(Below) It takes Peter's team around 2,000 hours to rebuild a Merlin engine.



for both cars and aviation, and this year the company celebrates its thirtieth anniversary.

What does Retro Track and Air Ltd specialise in?

We offer high-quality engineering in a number of fields, including maintenance and rebuilds of various engines, such as the Rolls-Royce Merlin and Griffon, of which we have now completed over a hundred examples. We've also carried out the restoration of numerous race cars. We manufacture a wide range of parts, including camshafts and propellers.

The engines that we've built include – for the last seventeen years – the Merlins and others for the Spitfires, Hurricanes and Lancaster of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight (BBMF). We also look after their DC-3 Dakota.

We've built Merlins for the Royal Australian Air Force P-51D and the Canadian Warplane Heritage Flight's Lancaster, which visited the UK two years ago, as well as the Spitfire for the Israeli and Dutch Air Forces.

It takes approximately 2,000 hours for a Merlin rebuild, so it isn't a quick business – it's a very precise and highly skilled one, which I'm very proud to be associated with.

It must be difficult sourcing some of the parts these days?

Yes, that's true. We do hold parts off old engines which are of no other use as a whole. We're also the smallest CAA UK-approved design and manufacturing company making new parts for clients.

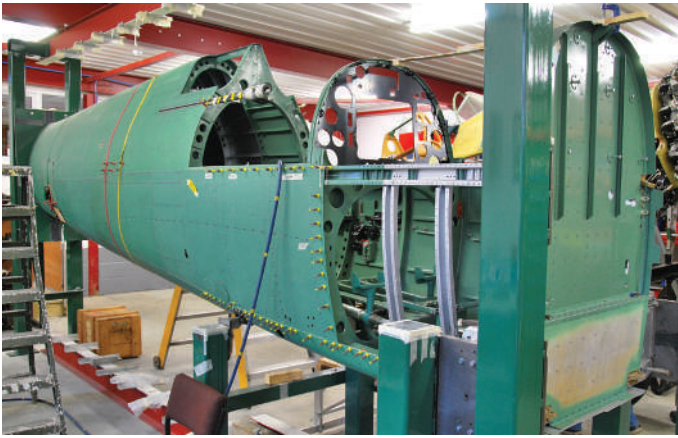
For instance, we make Merlin cylinder heads, and parts for other restoration companies – it's quite a small field we're in. That helps the approval and quality process as well as helping to keep costs more in control. If we hear about available parts we'll try and buy as many as we can for stock.

What current aircraft projects do you have in the workshop?

First there is Gloster Gladiator Mk 2, N5719, which was shot down during a dogfight with a Heinkel 111 during the defence of Narvik. We're using both undamaged original parts and items constructed from the original technical drawings.

We also have a Gloster Gamecock MK 2, of the type that operated with No 3 RAF Squadron and would have been seen at the splendid RAF Hendon Air Pageants in





(Above) Work is continuing on the ex-RAF, Polish Squadron Spitfire Mk 2 that Peter hopes to get flying once again.
(Right) Peter's company is equally adept at wooden and metal airframes. This is a set of Stearman wings undergoing restoration.



the 1930s. It's the only privately owned example of a potentially airworthy aircraft. Lastly, we have an ex-RAF Polish Squadron Spitfire Mk 2, which I hope to get flying.

How are you ensuring that the skills needed are being passed on?

It's difficult, but we have apprenticeship schemes which have helped. In fact, our Chief Engineer is younger than the company.

We've passed on our skills, knowledge and ideas over the years, so that we can continue to provide what's needed.

Have associations like the LAA helped?

Yes, without people building and maintaining their own aeroplanes – and in the classic/historic cars, steam and similar private hobby clubs, for example – much of what we need today would have gone.

I think that the LAA has helped promote aircraft building and kept these skills alive. I'm pleased people make kitplanes, as it's meant that it gives folk the courage to perhaps then go onto a plansbuilt aeroplane.

I very much admire the Isaacs Spitfire that Alan James built – a lovely finished article. You need lots of stickability to keep going – as we did with the Sirocco – but it's very satisfying to complete and fly at the end.

“I think that the LAA has helped promote aircraft-building and kept these skills alive”

What's your best aviation moment?

I was lucky enough to be able to fly a two-seat Spitfire – it really was glorious. After all the time and effort looking after all those Merlin engines, it was an ambition fulfilled.

Any aviation books you may recommend?

I think that a book by Neil Williams, *Sharpen Up Your Aviation Skills*, is a very worthwhile read.

Do you have any aviation heroes?

That's difficult to answer as so many did their bit in WWII. We mustn't forget the 55,000 bomber boys who never came home, but I think that the test pilots at Castle Bromwich, who were led by Alex Henshaw, deserve a great deal of praise. There was a non-stop line of aeroplanes being built, and if the weather

was poor one day they had twice as much to do the next, so keeping flying in all conditions was a great feat of airmanship and bravery.

What advice would you give to LAA members?

Get to know your aeroplane well, then, in the event that something does go wrong, you'll have a very good chance of putting it down and living to tell the tale. Maintenance is obviously important, so get to know your LAA Inspector, who can be invaluable to you.

What are your hopes for the future?

I will answer that with this: I'm very passionate for what our country has had to fight for and stand up against in the past. I'm someone who has one foot in the forties and the other in the current day – 'Lest We Forget' is very, very important to me. It would break my heart if the funding for the BBMF ever got cut and we couldn't remember those who gave their lives for us in such a graphic way. ■

I would like to thank all the Watts family and their employees, but particularly Peter and Rachel, for their help with this article. With the skills they offer the aviation and car racing community, we can look forward to many more years of ceremonial flypasts and vintage motorsport traditions to enjoy and respect.

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